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China as a Military Power

by Ron Montaperto

Conclusions

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) is a force of slowly improving, but still limited capabilities. Doctrinal and financial deficiencies will delay the PLA's ability to conduct sustained force projection for at least a decade.

PLA leaders have been forced to pursue selective modernization. Specific improvements in naval, air, and ground force capabilities will enable the PLA to maintain the credibility of Chinese claims in the South China Sea and influence the decisions of Taiwan's leaders.

But the PLA cannot seize and hold territories in the South China Sea. If China were to unch a war of attrition against Taiwan, China could eventually prevail, at a very high cost. A blockade might enable China to gain a political settlement on its terms. However, either action could fail if Taiwan were to receive significant external assistance.

Economic development imperatives will motivate civilian and military leaders to avoid conflict unless China's sovereignty is directly challenged.

Substantive relations between the U.S. military and the PLA are essential. PLA leaders need to make critical professional, technical, and political decisions about the future. It is important that the United States engage the PLA while it is possible to affect outcomes.

Military Modernization and Regional Uncertainties

Among the many uncertainties of the Asian security environment, none is more compelling than that surrounding the modernization program of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. For some observers, the combination of economic growth and force improvement signals Beijing's intention to establish regional hegemony.

Others acknowledge that the PLA can "spoil" United States' interests. But, citing the selective nature of PLA force improvements, Beijing's interest in regional stability, and the growing conventional capabilities of other regional powers, they tend to discount a PLA military threat. Chinese secrecy compounds the difficulty.

China has greater military power today than it did a decade ago. If Beijing were willing to pay the price, the PLA could wreak great damage. However, in assessing China's future threat potential, it is essential to consider the economic, political, and strategic constraints on PLA modernization. Such considerations suggest that the PLA is years away from achieving the capability to project military force in a sustained manner.

Strategic Intentions:

National Objectives and National Strategy

PLA officers enthusiastically support the defining objective of Beijing's national strategy, which is to see China assume the status of a great power. Nationalism and the weight of the past are important factors. A strong China will never again be subject to the humiliations of the past.

China's leaders believe that the key to great power status is to build a world-class economy and military. This requires maintaining a stable external environment to support high levels of economic growth. Conflict is to be avoided. Obvious exceptions involve sovereignty issues such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, or the South China Sea.

PLA leaders actively support China's present economic policies. Military leaders feel that, in addition to serving national strategic objectives, the policies provide the best means of acquiring the capabilities required in high-technology warfare. Reconstituting the PLA into a modern military force has been the goal of the military modernization program the PLA has pursued since the early 1980s. Lack of information about the military modernization program, in turn, is also the source of much of the uncertainty about China's future intentions.

Uncertain Progress

During the last decade, the military reduced its numbers by more than one million, introduced ranks, reformed education and training systems, implemented a reserve system, began to modernize its doctrine, and entered upon a modest program of weapons and equipment modernization.

The military modernization program has produced a self-sustaining cadre of highly professional officers; and the PLA is slowly developing the doctrinal concepts required for high-technology warfare. The effort to procure and field modern weapons, however, proceeds at a snail's pace.

Continuing Difficulties

Two sets of factors constrain overall progress. At the conceptual level, the PLA lacks a strategic focus. China's strategists must determine the most likely sources of any future conflict.

PLA analysts divide over which sets of regional relations will have the most impact on the future. Many seem to believe that relations between Washington and Beijing will drive regional events.

Senior military officers are suspicious of the long-term strategic intentions of the United States. They see in U.S. policies on Taiwan and Tibet, the World Trade Organization, and continuing pressures on human rights a challenge to Chinese sovereignty.

They also find evidence of a desire to slow China's economic growth and provoke a challenge to its

domestic political stability. These suspicions produced a major disruption of bilateral ties in June 1995 with charges that Washington had adopted a policy of Containment. Nonetheless, PLA leaders agreed that confrontation would not serve China's strategic interests and they supported the effort to arrest the decline in bilateral relations.

Other analysts judge that competition between the United States and Japan will emerge as a new source of regional instability. Still others think that the engine of regional change will be differences between the rich and poor nations. Finally, a few analysts see a future shaped by regional resistance to American efforts to maintain a defining role in Asia. It is important to note that the United States figures prominently in all scenarios.

Another conceptual constraint involves the need to create the operational doctrine that will permit the PLA to translate modern technologies into modern weapons, once it gains wide access to them.

This is a difficult task because PLA leaders have only recently jettisoned Maoist notions of a "People's War." These views anticipated the need to defend against a land invasion by an external power. The approach was to gain victory after a long war of attrition by trading space for time. But now, the absence of any such threat and the revolution in military affairs make such a strategy obsolete.

In 1985, the PLA decided that the most likely form of future conflict would be the so-called "Local War of Limited Duration." To prosecute such conflicts successfully requires the capability to mount an "Active Defense."

The Gulf War convinced Chinese military strategists that the war of the future is most likely to be localized, fought to achieve limited political objectives, and won by whichever side is better able to concentrate high-technology force at some distance from the national borders in a decisive strike.

However, many years will pass before the PLA can adopt doctrinal changes that match even today's standards.

The second set of constraints is material. Equipment modernization is the PLA's most important technical priority. However, it lacks the funds to procure modern equipment in sufficient quantities.

In the last six years, China's official defense budget has more than doubled to reach the 1995 figure of approximately US\$8 billion. Because the Chinese do not reveal a significant portion of total expenditures for defense, any figure must include an estimate of military funds from other sources. Most outside observers accept estimates of US\$20-25 billion.

Some of these monies have been used to finance the purchase of modern military equipment and military technologies from abroad, particularly from Russia. However, the quantities involved are small.

It is likely that the lion's share of the recent increases has been used to compensate for years of very low defense budgets during the 1980s, to offset the effects of inflation which has consistently approached 20% for the last several years, and to improve the quality-of-life for the forces. For example, in 1994, there was an across-the-board increase in the monthly wages of all PLA officers, with those at the top receiving an increase of more than 50%.

Finally, the PLA may be losing access to funds generated by the sale of civilian products produced in defense industry facilities and by the enterprises it owns. In 1994, citing an adverse impact on morale,

PLA leaders announced that most military units would have to divest themselves of their business holdings. If such funds were to be withheld, the military could lose nearly one quarter of its budget. The difference would have to be made up from a shrinking pool of official funds.

Selective Modernization

PLA force modernizers have identified a small number of critical military functions and are concentrating on improvements in these areas. Priorities involve force projection and include, but are not limited to:

developing anti-submarine warfare, ship-borne air defense, sustained naval operations, and amphibious warfare capabilities.

developing strategic airlift, aerial refueling, and ground-attack capabilities, as well as a new generation of air superiority fighters;

improving ground forces' mobility and logistical support, air defense, all weather operations, and command and control capabilities.

There has been some progress. Most of China's 24 Group Armies have now designated "rapid deployment" units. There is also a force of some 5,000 marines. These formations are equipped with the PLA's most modern ground weapons and are at the leading edge of training reform. While such "crack units" would be effective in operations in the South China Sea, their small size, their dispersal throughout China, and a lack of lift all limit their effectiveness for large scale operations, such as an invasion of Taiwan.

The Air Force is making an effort to address the problem of strategic lift. It has acquired 10 Ilyushin heavy-transport aircraft from Russia and in 1995 began an effort to integrate long-range transport operations into the training cycle. However, the small number of suitable aircraft will make it difficult to conduct such training on a scale large enough to make a difference. The Air Force has also acquired 26 Su-27 fighter aircraft. Although the Su-27 provides a clear qualitative gain, the lack of an aerial refueling capability will deny the PLA their full benefit.

The PLA Navy is replacing or improving its old surface combatants and its submarines. It has also acquired one Kilo-Class submarine from Russia. However, these improvements will not address the fundamental problem of the navy: its inability to mount sustained, coordinated operations and to protect itself while doing so.

Overall, despite selective improvements, the PLA is not yet capable of sustained force projection at any distance from China's borders. The PLA cannot seize and hold territories in the South China Sea. At some point during operations in the Spratlys, its forces would become vulnerable to significant air and sea counterattack by regional forces.

The PLA cannot yet transport a credible invasion force to Taiwan. Taipei would have significant warning time if Beijing were to prepare for such an action.

Moreover, Taiwan possesses an effective deterrent against Chinese attack. The impending delivery of 150 F-16 and 60 Mirage 2000 fighter aircraft, the deployment of new frigates, an improved air defense system, and earlier improvements in ground-force capabilities will enable Taiwan to maintain its

qualitative advantage over a numerically superior PLA. In the absence of a declaration of independence, this qualitative advantage, coupled with ambiguity about Taipei's ability to secure external assistance, will continue to ensure Taiwan's security.

The Mid-Term Strategic Focus

The PLA is dealing with a two-fold security challenge. Immediately and tactically, China is determined to maintain control over the situations with the greatest potential for conflict. This means putting teeth into Beijing's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea and preventing a declaration of independence by Taiwan. By deterring potential conflict in these hotspots, it becomes possible for the Chinese to gain the time necessary to address the larger, more broadly strategic, dimension of the major security challenge: creating an economy capable of supporting the range of economic, political, and military options that will guarantee China's position as a great power.

Looking Ahead

Any assessment of the impact of PLA conventional force modernization on the regional military balance must also consider the question of numbers. At present China lacks the capability either to produce or to purchase new systems in the quantities necessary to effect a major impact.

Critical indicators include:

For the Navy, the numbers of ships and their associated air defense and ASW systems, new constructions of supply and amphibious ships, and development of a carrier-capable aircraft.

For the Air Force, increases in the numbers of lift and ground-attack aircraft, proficiency in aerial refueling, and the fielding of an air-superiority fighter.

And, for the ground forces, an increase in the number of rapid reaction units.

It is also important to monitor developments in doctrine and training. Here, critical indicators would be those pointing beyond the upgrading of navy and air force roles and missions in support of ground forces towards superiority and denial missions at some distance from Chinese territorial seas.

Recommendations

PLA capabilities will continue their present pattern of slow increase. Regional concerns about Beijing's intentions will grow, particularly if the Chinese fail to respond to calls for greater transparency. This could eventually pose a problem for U.S. security policy as regional allies attempt to accommodate in different ways to their individual perceptions of Chinese intentions and capabilities.

This is, *prima facie*, reason to engage the PLA directly in a broad web of substantive professional contacts, including a substantive dialogue on security issues. The major aim of any such dialogue should be to identify the areas in which United States and Chinese security interests converge or differ and then to work out a mutually suitable accord. U.S. allies and friends within the region would favor such a policy.

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The PLA's Force Structure, 1995

| | | |
|-----------|-------------------------|-----------|
| | ICBM | 17 |
| | IRBM | 70+ |
| | SLBM | 1 |
| Missile | Personnel | 2,200,000 |
| Forces | Tanks | 10,000 |
| | Artillery | 18,300 |
| Army | Personnel | 260,000 |
| Navy | Destroyers and Frigates | 50 |
| Air Force | Submarines | 52 |
| | Personnel | 470,000 |
| | Fighters | 4,400 |
| | Bombers | 420 |

Source: *The Military Balance 1995-1996*, London:

Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 176-179.

Chinese Defense Budget

(in US\$ billions)

| Year | China's Official Data | IMF's Data* | World Bank's Data* |
|------|--------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| 1990 | 6.1 | 27.2 | 44.0 |
| 1991 | 6.2 | 28.9 | 46.8 |
| 1992 | 6.8 | 32.7 | 53.1 |
| 1993 | 7.4 | 34.5 | 56.2 |
| 1994 | 6.3 | 36.3 | 59.7 |
| 1995 | 7.5 | 38.7 | 62.8 |

Source: *The Military Balance 1995-1996*, London: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 271.

*The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank's data are based on purchasing-power-parity (PPP) estimates of gross domestic product.

The PLA's Purchases from Russia

| | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|---|
| Aircraft | Su-27 | Bought 26 in 1992, with up to 25 more to follow |
| | Ilyushin | Purchased 10 |
| | Transport Aircraft | |
| Naval Systems | Kilo-Class Submarines | Imported one in 1995, has ordered at least three more |
| Missiles | Air Defense | Imported the S-300 air defense systems (about 100 missiles) in 1993 |

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